

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT



Public Roundtable on
Chief of the Metropolitan Police Department
Robert J. Contee III
Confirmation Resolution of 2021

Testimony of
Robert J. Contee III
Acting Chief of Police

Before the
Committee on the Judiciary & Public Safety
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Charles Allen, Chairperson

Virtual Hearing
March 25, 2021

Good morning, Chairman Allen, members of the Committee, and everyone watching the hearing virtually. My name is Robert Contee, and I am the Acting Chief of Police for the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). It is an honor and a privilege to be testifying before the Council and the residents of the District of Columbia to ask to be confirmed as MPD's next Chief of Police. This morning, I will share information about my background growing up in DC and how it has shaped my vision for the Department and the city.

I am a proud son of our nation's capital, raised on 21st Street Northeast, in the Carver Terrace community in Ward 5. When I was growing up, life was not easy in my neighborhood. Many of the challenges and traumas experienced by so many young people today were very real and present in my community and quite frankly in my home. Shootings, murders, crime, drug dealing, poverty, joblessness, hopelessness, domestic violence, educational and health disparities were all ever present in my neighborhood. More closely, in my home, I experienced first-hand the impact of drug use and abuse on a family and its children. My father, who was 17 years old when I was born, not only sold drugs, but he was sick with addiction. I knew the smell of marijuana as a young kid. I remember the smell of PCP packaged in aluminum foil for sale and stored in a mayonnaise jar in our freezer. I remember seeing powder cocaine stashed in my father's favorite hiding places, as well as syringes he used to put poison in his veins. And when crack cocaine ravaged our neighborhood, my home was not spared. My dad no longer sold drugs by that time, but he was addicted to crack cocaine. I can recall the home-made crack pipes that replaced the syringes as his addiction intensified over the years. That addiction would last long into my adulthood and well into my rise in the Metropolitan Police Department.

Just as I know the impact of drug addiction on children, I also know the judgment that some people make on the family. People have sometimes asked me, "where was your mother?" And I am quick to answer, she was right there. In fact, she was my first example of a strong Black woman. Mom volunteered at my school as a teacher's aide to ensure she kept tabs on me and my siblings. School provided meals to help carry us over when food was running low. She always wanted the best for us, despite her limited resources and physical capacity. She was tough on us, but it was her way of demonstrating her love. She sacrificed and tolerated her husband's addiction so that her children would grow up knowing their father. No matter how tall I got, she was ready to stand on a chair to stare me down if I ever got out of line with her. I never forgot that, and to this day I thank her for being tough on me. You had to be tough in my neighborhood to navigate the traps that ensnare young Black men in underserved communities. It built my character.

She taught me about perseverance and having an attitude of gratitude. She taught me how to be humble and work hard. As a result, I live by the motto that "Excellence is Transferrable!" In all that I do, I aim to do it in the spirit of excellence. In my house, mom did not tolerate doing anything halfway, which means you kept trying until you got it right.

Despite the challenges we had growing up – or maybe because of them, my mom and dad are my heroes. In addition to the challenges and the community struggles we faced together as a family, they were both born with cerebral palsy. Even with these disabilities, they raised three healthy children – clothed us, fed us as best they could, and most importantly, they loved us. And despite my father's addiction, I saw him every day. Every day, he walked to 21st and Benning Road to catch the X2 bus to work. And now, through God's grace, his own determination, and



drug treatment, he has been drug-free for 11 years. I am so thankful that he was never incarcerated because of his addiction. He was not violent, he was sick. So when I tell you that I understand the challenges our communities face – our youth and our families, I mean it personally.

This background, my past, has shaped my view of our communities and the people in them. Some people would not take a chance on kids with similar backgrounds, that grow up in distressed communities. But here I am before you as an example of what can become of young people in our communities when they are given an opportunity.

My opportunities came in the form of dedicated teachers in the DC Public Schools going into their personal pockets to ensure I was able to go on field trips my parents could not afford. The exposure beyond my immediate community opened my eyes to a world I could only read about in books. My opportunities also came because neighbors threatened to tell my momma if I was acting up in the community. It was job opportunities that helped break the cycle of poverty in my family. I remember sweeping door mats and taking out the trash for neighbors in the apartment buildings where I lived for small change. At 12 or 13, I was caddying at the Langston Golf Course because I was not old enough to work. At 14, I worked in the Mayor's Summer Youth Employment Program to buy school clothes and at 15, washed dishes at a local catering company. At 16, I worked at the old Kinney Shoe Store at Hechinger Mall, and in the summer, attended Mayor Barry's Youth Leadership Institute, on the campus of Howard University. But the most pivotal moment for me was when I got my fair shot as a DC police cadet on November 20, 1989, at age 17. It changed my entire life. It was these and other opportunities that helped shape the man I am today.

I share all of this with you because I have not forgotten where I come from. These life experiences will help me to lead and guide the men and women of the Metropolitan Police Department to be the most compassionate, intelligent, competent, capable, guardians and crime fighters we have seen in the District of Columbia. I want our officers to demonstrate compassion for people wherever they are on the road of life and be able to use discretion and seek alternatives when it is appropriate to resolve conflict within community.

Before turning to your questions, I would like to highlight just a few of my immediate priorities for the coming months. As we move forward from some of the unique challenges of the past year and even just the past 12 weeks since I was sworn in, I will be continuing to examine all aspects of our operations to ensure that the Department is serving and protecting the community with compassion, equity, and integrity, and that MPD models the best practices related to transparency and accountability.

First and foremost, the Department will be laser focused on violent crime in our communities. People have a right to be safe and secure in the community. I know the feeling of being part of a family that has survived a violent crime. I remember well the day I was in a crime briefing, and I got a call that my father was stabbed while on his way to work. He was taken to the hospital with a collapsed lung. While I am thankful for his recovery, I still think about the fact that we never caught the person responsible. There are many families in our communities that seek justice for loved ones that have been victims of violence, and I assure you MPD will be tireless in our pursuit of criminals that hurt our family members and make our communities unsafe.



I have seen far too much bloodshed in our communities, and it breaks my heart to think about the lives lost, the opportunity and promise that remain unfulfilled because of violence. And this lost opportunity is on both sides – the victims, of course, but also the offenders. Our city is an ecosystem that must work together to protect the victims, but also to reach individuals who are at risk before they become involved in violence. But make no mistake: in order to stabilize communities that are in crisis, repeat violent offenders must be held accountable for their actions. It is impossible for families and communities to begin the process of healing when perpetrators of violence are ever-present and not held accountable for destroying our communities.

Last year, 198 people were murdered in the District; 172 of these victims died from gun violence. In addition, 750 people were injured by gun violence. In looking at some of the city's most vulnerable populations, it is disturbing that the number of female homicide victims increased from eight in 2019 to 29 last year. We know that at least ten of these women were victims of domestic violence. Tragically, 11 children were victims of homicide in 2020. This is unacceptable. As a great city with many resources, we should be able to protect all our children from deadly violence and simultaneously ensure a system of accountability.

As I mentioned two weeks ago at MPD's Performance Oversight Hearing, I am reviewing and will be revising the agency's strategies related to guns and gun violence. I want to be more strategic about getting the right guns out of the wrong hands. We have already shifted resources to focus on an intelligence-based policing approach to identify, interdict, and interrupt violent offenders within the District. The goal is to build strong criminal cases on offenders and groups to ensure those repeat offenders cannot continue to endanger our communities. I am already seeing some success with this focused approach to combating violent crime in the community.

This effort is closely linked to my goal to ensure that our strategies support – and don't undermine – vibrant and safe communities where our residents – our youth, families, and seniors – can thrive and succeed. I understand how structural racism pervades so many aspects of our society – housing, education, healthcare, access to financial resources, access to opportunity, and policing. And I understand how our choices as police officers can aggravate or mitigate structural racism. The critical challenge facing our society is how we can work together to dismantle structural racism to establish a more equitable nation. And for law enforcement, our challenge is to continue to support and promote public safety – including by holding violent offenders accountable – while not exacerbating inequity. As a resident of the District and a committed police officer, I know we have a critical role in keeping our residents safe. But we must work together with our communities to ensure that, like doctors, we do no harm in the process.

I'm looking forward to listening to and talking with the community more in the coming months about how we can partner together to earn trust and build relationships while safeguarding our residents. Earlier this month, I launched the first in a series of listening sessions with community members. These listening sessions, which are facilitated by professionals from outside the Department, touch upon critical topics, such as the role of police in society, what should the police be doing, what should the police not be doing, and what other services does our community need to ensure public safety. If the last year has taught us nothing else, it is that we



must guide our actions not by what we can do, but what we should do. We must always be ready and willing to change, adjust, and learn.

The release earlier this week of the District of Columbia Auditor’s report, “The Metropolitan Police Department and the Use of Deadly Force: Four Case Studies 2018-2019,” is an example of critical partnerships that we will use to improve our service to the community. Although the report confirmed our findings that the uses of force in the cases reviewed were justified, the loss of any life is tragic, and MPD must continue to work to prevent situations where deadly force is necessary from occurring in the first place. I am committed to ensuring our use of force policies, training, and practices remain a model for the nation. A number of the recommendations are current practices at MPD and others are aligned with my vision for the agency. Accordingly, MPD has already begun working on implementation.

We recognize that we are at a critical juncture in law enforcement. With the killing of George Floyd at the hands of police last year and the subsequent protests for police reform and racial justice, it is more important than ever that we examine all aspects of the way we are interacting with our community and ensure that our policies governing the use of force and use of force investigations are comprehensive. Most importantly, we must continue to ensure that our policies, training, and day-to-day operations require our officers to employ de-escalation techniques to avoid the use of force whenever possible. Deadly force should only be used as a last resort: when there is a threat of serious bodily injury or death, and there are no other reasonable options available.

Use of force policies and practices are a tangible measure by which to gauge a police department. What has perhaps not been assessed as broadly yet is police policies and practices – top to bottom, inside and out – as they relate to equity. But this is a core issue for community trust in their police, as well as for trust within the department. Therefore, I am commissioning a national organization to conduct an organizational health assessment to review MPD’s policies and practices related to diversity, inclusion, and equity in multiple areas, including race, gender, and sexual orientation, in functional domains such as recruiting and training, supervision, promotional processes, EEO processes, and internal investigations. External to the agency, the review will focus on the delivery of police services and ensuring unbiased policing efforts. The review will include a specific focus on extremism, hate speech, and white supremacy – assessing processes and practices to eliminate the impacts of each within the Department.

To be clear, to the men and women of the Metropolitan Police Department, I believe in you, and believe the overwhelming majority of members respect and value everyone in the District. It has been my distinct honor to serve this city beside you for all of my adult life. And while my job as Chief of Police is of course to work to safeguard the community, it is also to support the well-being of the MPD workforce, sworn and professional. This priority became all the more urgent in the aftermath of the insurrection on January 6, 2021 when our officers were engaged in a violent and dangerous confrontation with armed rioters for hours. This event followed a difficult year for our officers of long hours due to frequent First Amendment assemblies, under the added stress – both professional and personal – of the global pandemic.

In the aftermath of January 6th, I began laying the groundwork for a stronger focus on employee well-being by undergoing a live debriefing about the impact of January 6th on our officers and on myself. While I hope that our officers will never see another professional



situation as challenging as January 6th, repeat exposure to trauma is a fact of police work in our city. In order to fight against compassion fatigue and to have officers who can serve our community with empathy, we must work to support the well-being of the whole person for all of our members. Accordingly, I have dedicated a full-time position for a well-being coordinator and two additional clinicians to support MPD's Employee Assistance Program. The new Well-being Coordinator will support the development and implementation of a Department-wide holistic approach to mental health. The new staff member will coordinate the complex and critical network of resources for officers and work to expand services and member participation in them. This will include implementation of the Blue Courage program, which will foster critical discussions around resiliency, behavioral health, and leadership for our Sergeants and mid-rank members.

Looking forward, we have a lot of work to do to ensure the continued safety of the District, its residents, the federal enclave, MPD officers, and others. I would be remiss if I did not raise two critical issues that jeopardize our ability to do so. For one, the assault on the Capitol has exposed weaknesses in the security of our city. The federal police forces in DC are reexamining their security protocols given the risks of both foreign and domestic terrorism. As the Chief of the District's municipal police force, I must think about our preparations not only for possible attacks, but the daily impact of the changing operations of our federal partners. As they harden targets in the federal enclave, other buildings in the city under MPD jurisdiction may become more likely targets. I believe this will be a pressing issue in the months and years to come.

In addition, between the twin challenges of the COVID pandemic and rising civil unrest, the past 12 months have been exhausting for everyone at MPD. Sworn members of all ranks and professional employees alike have been working around the clock while dealing directly with issues that have increased stress levels for everyone in this country. I have no doubt that MPD will successfully meet the challenges of this new security posture, but this workload and stress level are unsustainable with the current staffing levels, which are dropping every day. This presents several risks. The most obvious are related to the rising violent crime we have already discussed, and the need to remain in a posture of heightened alert to be prepared for the unresolved security issues in our country. But beyond those issues are more subtle ones.

For one, District residents have expectations about being able to call for police response. Mayor Bowser has tasked her team with broadening and strengthening alternative responses to many situations that MPD currently handles, including response to some calls around behavioral health issues and traffic. But these transitions take time, and in the meantime, if police are not able to deliver service in the manner and timeliness which residents and businesses have come to expect, trust will be weakened, and our ability to combat violent crime will be eroded. We cannot reduce police staffing in anticipation that down the road systems will be set up to provide service and response to the community. Decades of federal programs have supported a common public expectation of community policing centered around police as the core problem solvers in the community. We cannot undo these expectations and systems in a year or two. Other agencies and community groups must have established staffing, policies, and practices in order to respond to the community.



In the meantime, to continue to make improvements in policies and practices, the Department must have the manpower to develop and implement them. For instance, I would like to increase training for officers in several areas, including de-escalation and behavioral health. But additional training beyond our annual 40 hours of professional development training takes officers off the street. We need to maintain staffing in order to ensure our officers continue to get the best training. I also want our supervisors to spend more time in the field with our officers to improve employee development and accountability. This includes training all MPD members on Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement, to ensure that we are all holding each other accountable for meeting high standards. But enhanced supervision means we need to shift or reduce administrative work that keeps them off the streets. And while overtime may be a short-term solution to fill gaps left by a shrinking workforce, it also contributes to an over-worked and burnt-out workforce and could impair decision making. I urge the Council to recognize that supporting strong training, supervision, and accountability measures require manpower, and reducing staffing makes it more difficult to make those improvements.

In closing, it is my great honor to lead the Metropolitan Police Department to be the standard of excellence for policing in the 21st century. There is room at the table for anyone and everyone who is committed to working toward focused, balanced, and fair policing in our nation's capital. I look forward to continuing to work with our communities and this Committee on our shared goal of improving safety in the District.

